III

THE POSSIBILITIES OF THE NEAR FUTURE IN ENGLISH LETTERS

PROPHECY is a dangerous trade; and the reservations implied in the title of this lecture do not mend matters much. Still, stronger even than the spirit of scientific caution is our curiosity about the future; and there are cases when it may be wiser to indulge the wish than to repress it, provided we do not take ourselves, or our subject, too seriously. Indeed, an attempt like the present can only be excused on the score of its being a search, not for what will be, but for what is and has been; of its trying not to throw out oracular guesses, but to study from a new angle the ever present problem of artistic development.

That literature does not develop entirely at random, is here an indispensable assumption. It would be vain to follow up the lines of yesterday and to-day into those of a probable to-morrow, unless the latter were connected with the former by some relation of a more or less permanent nature. A degree of periodicity, a constant law in variation, must exist. Now such a law can be inferred from the course of the past; and a brief sketch of it should be given at once.

The web of literary history is woven of two mingling strains. One, the more essential, represents the contribution of the mind; the other, that of external and material circumstances. The former is a psychological tendency to the recurrence of two main moods, a period of predominant

intellectuality being followed by a phase prevailingly imaginative and emotional, this in its turn calling for an era of intelligence, and so on. When that relatively regular order has been perceived in the history of a given literature—that of England for instance—we realize that the terms "classical" and "romantic" have, in common use, been detached from their originally narrow sense, and are the only words which we can employ to denote those two alternating literary tempers and ages. We grow aware, at the same time, that their succession allows of a wide margin of novelty and freshness, as the deeper memory of nations never forgets what they have actually lived through, and each new phase contains in itself the accumulated capital of previous experiences. In that way no moment of the present can be absolutely similar to any moment of the past, not even to those which it most closely resembles.

The other strain that enters into the shaping of literary history is the social evolution of the human group, whose collective mind finds expression in an original body of writings. The more important events and influences of an age, whether political or economic, have a direct bearing on the rhythm of psychological moods; according as they fall in with that rhythm, or rather run across it, they may give it a greater impetus, or check its course for a while; moreover, they always build the frame and historical figure of a period, thus offering to intellectual and artistic development the canvas on which it must paint itself.

In the light of that scheme, and leaving out the case of a sudden, totally unexpected disruption, such as a new world war, the possibilities of the near future in English letters can be to some extent conjectured from these known data of the present: first, the character of the last well-

marked literary phase; then, the predominant influences in contemporary history.

It seems pretty safe to say that the last period which we can mark out and organize in the course of English, perhaps of European letters, was decidedly romantic. It began from 1875 to 1880, was in full swing between 1890 and 1910; slack water, or even the ebbing of the tide, was perceptible before 1914. There can be no doubt, again, that the Great War is the outstanding event whose shadow will stretch forward for some time yet. It is reasonable to expect that its influence will be felt decisively in the coming years, though that effect has not proved so immediate or simple as had been confidently announced. A new spiritual era has not dawned with the armistice. The earthquake did at first confuse all issues; it retarded the evolution of art, before it could quicken it.

The disappointment of the dark time which followed too sanguine hopes is upon us still. We dimly feel that a transition has begun; but whither it is taking us no one can say. Pessimism, in its turn, may be an ill-advised emotional reaction. That some precious seed has been sown into the harrowed soil of the modern world remains highly probable; but its growth might be slower than we had thought. In the domain of literature, the new inspiration will come with its full force not to the men who fought, but to their children. It is not war that is a second birth, but the recoil from it.

The inferences to be drawn from the recent course of events must thus be very guarded. But the facts of literary evolution during the last definite period, and at the present time, are a more solid ground to build upon. It is necessary that we should survey those facts before we can proceed any further.

The twentieth century in England has cut itself loose from the nineteenth. But in their revolt against the shibboleths of their fathers, the new generation did not take the time to be fair, and never troubled to draw nice distinctions. The decline of the Victorian spirit began before the long reign was over; and the break-up of that imperious tradition was not the work of a single day. The thirty-five years from 1875 to 1910 have their unity in the more or less open defiance of the intellectual and social discipline which the preceding age had so triumphantly enforced. The stir of a renascent romanticism was then in the air. A more acute criticism shook the positive, simple faith in science which had given its religion to the mid-century. Philosophy labored with an idealist revival; the pendulum swung back from rationalism to pragmatism; a mystic note was heard again; Samuel Butler denounced the Darwinists and restated evolution in creative terms; George Meredith exalted the intelligence, but embodied its deepest teaching in the soul-felt lessons of Mother Earth. Meanwhile a decadent century was holding up orthodoxy to scorn; Swinburne and the symbolists in poetry, the naturalists and the esthetes in art and morals, were rediscovering the romantic ardor, or following the freedom of the artist even to the self-imposed slavery of a passionate obedience. The quieter realism of a respectable age was being discarded in favor of the thrills of adventure and romance; the novel of imagination was born again. In the Celtic revival, the glow of yearning and the glamor of dreams were fed by the rekindled flame of national enthusiasm. Another revolt was that of the heart against the wrongs of the social order; from William Morris to Galsworthy, literature was instinct with the generous feeling of a bolder fraternity.

On the eve of the war, it looked as if the moral destruc-

tion had gone, in certain fields, far enough, or too far for the silent genius which, in the dim regions of the subconscious, keeps watch over the destinies of races. Some signs seemed to show that the tide was turning, or setting again in the direction of a constructive ideal. Much of the prevailing romanticism still, but different tendencies as well, a desire to organize the emotions, the wills, and the doings of men around common beliefs of the character or of the mind, were to be found in the doctrines of action—the imperialism, the traditionalism, the socialism, of which Kipling, Chesterton, Wells, and Shaw were the prophets. Indeed, the psychological features of the period were anything but simple. As compared with any other age, the early twentieth century showed the greater complexity which its longer and more various heredity made only too natural. The subtle interplay of reason and instinct, of intelligence and intuition, in Shaw, Wells, and Galsworthy, no less than in Meredith and Butler, points to an intimate interpenetration of impulses, which qualifies the predominance of the leading motives, without destroying it.

If the preceding analysis has not been entirely mistaken, we should be able to expect, in the normal course of things, that the present transition should lead to one more constructive period, with a marked ascendancy of the intellectual or classical tendencies. The kindred values of order, balance, adjustment, finish, and rationality, would naturally be sought by the coming age, even though its very substance was permeated by the centrifugal desires and the inordinate longings of yesterday. No sooner has this possibility sketched itself out, than we become aware of what is at least a remarkable coincidence, though doubtless too perfect to turn out quite genuine in the end: the main legacy of the war so far has obviously been to create an immense

desire for the readjustment of the world; and after the great havoc, the slogan of the last years has been the blessed word, reconstruction. Thus, at first sight, it would seem that in the literary phase which is probably beginning, the spontaneous rhythm of the mind, and the major historical influences, might not be at cross purposes, but confirm and strengthen each other.

No less striking is the analogy, that presses itself at once upon us, of the latest movement in French letters. A "classical" reaction had begun in France before the War; it has grown to be recognized as the leading feature of the present. Though it is far from drawing to itself all the talents, and its political or social importance may be often exaggerated, there is no doubt that the most strenuous and systematic attempt to rally the widely divergent aspirations of the young writers round a common principle, has been made by the young "classicists". Their aims are obviously coherent, in so far as they stand at the same time for rational thinking, authority in government, and a constructive perfection of form in art. Now, the history of literature during the last hundred and twenty-five years shows us that new movements usually began in France and spread thence to England, especially when they were of an intellectualist nature, the most notable exception being the great romantic wave of the early nineteenth century, which crossed the Channel southward. We might then expect that the French classicists of the present day should be, in the flesh as well as the spirit, the harbingers of the literary school whose advent in England the logic of precedent leads us to foresee.

It is now time we should leave conjectures for realities, turn to Britain, and ask ourselves whether any visible symptoms there give support to our anticipations.

We can see at a glance that the present course of English letters offers us nothing at all comparable with the clear-cut doctrine and the partisan ardor of the French classicists. This in itself is no wonder: literary programs do not thrive on British soil; descriptions of aims in advance of realization are very infrequent, and schools are organized after the event by the judgment of the critics. A second glance shows us the greatest confusion of issues. Things are pretty much as they were before the war, with scattered tendencies, variously opposed temperaments, and few definite formulas. This, again, holds no surprise for us. The larger part of the literary output, in quantity, is always conservative, and shows no departure from the accepted types of yesterday. The vital movements—the seeds of the future—may remain for some time quite unnoticed. It is natural, on the other hand, that the present moment should be remarkable for nothing more than for the divergence of its aims; never was the treasure of artistic tradition such a burden; never was the memory of the race so rich with dimly remembered images and rhythms, arrayed in all the successive fashions of the past. The increasing strain laid on the subconscious energies of the mind by the accumulated store of experience makes itself felt in the ever shorter duration of well-marked periods. A time has come when to all appearances the perception of a long series of esthetic endeavors and successes is the dominant element of culture; that intimate knowledge, born in every sensibility that opens to art, gives each new voice the mellowness of innumerable half-forgotten echoes, but makes the absolute convincing originality of accents never heard before, an almost impossible gift. The question rises of itself, whether that eclectic old age in which the life of a national literature can be indefinitely and brilliantly prolonged, but does not

allow of any decisive renewal, might not be beginning for some peoples of the old world, and particularly for France and England.

Taking stock of the whole field of English letters, we meet with a fair number of disconnected signs, substantial enough when brought together, and which might point to some progress towards a new period of the "classical" type. The typical men of this period, contrary to what is the case in France, would not claim a conscious kinship with the tradition of the classic centuries: whilst the nationalism of young French writers will turn to the age of Louis XIV for its esthetic ideal, it is not to the reign of Queen Anne and to Pope that the patriotic pride of English writers will turn. The word "classical" in England has no other spell than that with which it may have been invested by the ritual atmosphere of the schools and universities. But the name hardly matters. In its characteristics, the new phase would possess the psychological substance of classicism, shot, as is now the rule, with the attributes of the preceding, and of all phases.

Among the poets of recent years, a group apart might be formed of fastidious, scholarly writers, whose inspiration, in subject, manner, and language, harks back to the models of antiquity, or the modern schools founded upon them. Lascelles Abercrombie, Sturge Moore, and J. Elroy Flecker, who died so young, do not properly belong to their own time, but to the continuity of an unbroken tradition. Again, the poetry of to-day is still, in its major aspects, fraught with a romantic spirit of freedom, unconstrained motion, and intuitive appeal; but close by daring attempts to break away definitively from the more or less regular pattern of measured verse, cadences are often heard which

testify to a refreshed and wiser preference of the ear for some sort of regular scheme in the music of the line.

Criticism is in the present age more truly than it ever was before, a creative force, narrowly associated with the most spontaneous impulses of a highly conscious time. It is a remarkable fact that whilst the critics who have just passed away, Raleigh, Clutton-Brock, relied mainly on the delicacy of their sensitive insight, the most brilliant of the younger men should use his penetration as a means to a much more deliberate analysis. The method of Lytton Strachey, no less than his style, bear the marks of French influence; his works are intellectual to a degree rarely met with in England.

Most of the critics of to-day dabble with psycho-analysis; and many are the novelists, playwrights, or poets who borrow from it the whole or part of their inspiration. That current of ideas, complex as it is, harmonizes readily enough with the symptoms of a coming age of rationalism and lucidity. The psycho-analyst lives on a stimulated subconsciousness, and thus takes his cue from the last romantic revival. But his attitude is essentially unromantic. He is out for self-knowledge, to the bitter end. His passion is the scientific desire of the mind. His manner may be what he likes: there is at the back of it the cold clear temper of the anatomist busy with a dissection. The very aim and the process of the "new psychology" could not be reconciled with a predominance of imaginative emotion; they belong, as of right, to the domain of the intellect. In so far as art is impregnated with them, it obeys the magnetism of a new, or rather an old and a rejuvenated ideal.

The same, or nearly, might be said of the extreme lengths to which some prose writers and poets, in various fields of

literature, are pushing the method of discontinuous presentment. As the hunger for truth was the guiding impulse of the psycho-analyst, these authors are swayed by the spirit of unflinching objectivity. Their principle works out to a system of absolute jottings, free from every shred of composition or sequence. They are thus in a direct line the heirs of the preceding age, when the disciplined kinds and patterns of the Victorian era were broken up by the rebellion of the intuitive forces; they only go one stage further on the road already marked out by the impressionist lyric or painting, free verse, the formless novel, etc. But it is easy to see that by reaching, and passing, the limits compatible with the average reader's assimilation of artistic aims, they are opening the way for a reaction in favor of coherence and logic. What is more germane to our purpose is that they do bear in themselves the seeds of the rational age which is probably coming. Their mood is attuned to it in advance. Mr. Joyce's *Ulysses,* the short stories of Mrs. Virginia Woolf, are highly intellectual exercises. Their analytical ingenuity, and their bold endeavor to capture the elementary stuff of the inner life, are extremely interesting; but the range of their art is obviously limited by the lack of all emotional appeal. Here again, we might say that the psychological substance of classicism is present, in the utter absence of classical construction. In the development of literature, such a paradox would naturally play the part of a transition.

More significant than those symptoms of actual movements, is the cast of thought that is spreading universally, and bids fair to lend the next period its moral tone. For better for worse, the frame of mind into which the conflicting moods of the present seem to merge is one of decided, though somewhat embittered or despondent ration-

ality. The ashy fruit of disillusionment, and the more sustaining harvest of human experience, are thus at one in nourishing a firm and patient resolve—the will to look things in the face, and square the hopes of the race with the iron laws of fate. The promise of a better world to come has not vanished, though it has receded into the distance. Now the worst of the after-war depression is over, the normal composure of the English mind seems to be in a process of recovery; the key-note of the near future rings out audibly: it is positive and experimental. The prevailing desire is for sanity. Those would be the features of an age of concentration and clear purpose, obviously fitted by its inner nature for the advent of one more "classical" period, in the broader sense which we submit that word should definitely assume.

Such are the omens of to-morrow, as we can read them. Those probabilities and possibilities are very far from making up a solid inference. Still, there may be enough in the thesis to render it worth arguing. However composite the next phase must and will be, it will, rather than not, bear that general stamp.

One might conceive, in the abstract, that the next phase should bear no recognizable stamp, because the capitalization of esthetic moods threatens to destroy, in the long run, the law of psychological recurrence. The power of taking a fresh start has been perceptibly weakening; we have no perfect assurance that it is not on the eve of giving way. Should the era of stagnation draw near, classicism and romanticism would finally, in so far as England was concerned, be reconciled through eclecticism.

We are thus led to ask ourselves whether the moral and social conditions of the present encourage the hope that a fresh impulse might set loose new creative energy and

make it possible for the older nations of Europe to start again through the cycle of changes which they have almost covered to its final stage. Such a problem, wide as it is, could at least be fittingly taken up, as a conclusion to what remains an ambitious argument.

There is no reason to believe that the genius of English literature has run its full course, and that its maturity, the marks even of a vigorous old age, must deprive it of the resilience which it showed in a glorious past. The history of every country bears witness to the elasticity of the spirit, the happy perverseness of life; again and again, the foretold decay has turned out to be a new birth; the lie has been given to the laments of the prophets.

The Old World did expect to renew its youth in the ordeal of the war. That hope is much less sanguine now. But the nations of the West keep yearning for a fresh stimulus; and as they grope for it in earnest, they may find it. Many are the ways that could lead to the longed-for rejuvenescence. A return to nature has been the chronic desire of a sophisticated civilization. While Ruskin, and Morris, and Carpenter, seem to have failed, the essence of their teaching is slowly permeating an age better aware of the relation between physical and spiritual health. As England was the cradle of modern industry, hers is the race which has most clearly experienced its baneful effects. A future of garden-cities and open-air living would mean more than a purified blood: a cleansed soul. Then, the advent of labor to political authority may betoken the gradual development of a new social order; the rule of a more fully realized democracy would be more happy if it were more wise; in a nation of free guilds, culture, whatever its quality, would not be adulterated with the aristocratic legacy of the past; artistic impulses would rise more spontaneously from

the native gifts of the people. Lastly, the dawn of an international organization throws a fresh, though perhaps a doubtful light, on the fate of the traditional literatures, with their exclusively national outlook. Can the cosmopolitan spirit that is bound to spread, infuse vitality into the intellectual life of human groups, whose strongest bond of union has been a feeling of separate kinship, as against the rest of the world? If the problem is susceptible of a positive solution, English literature will probably be one of those which thrive, instead of declining, on a more intimate and constant intercourse with the various families of man; it has already shown its assimilative energy; and the zeal with which Britain is taking up the cause of the League of Nations would point to some shifting of her ambition, from the field of imperialism on to that of moral influence among equals.

Those are the happy possibilities. Needless to say, others are to be considered, such as a new European war, or the opening of an era of social strife. There is something in the aspect of the world at present, as to the former risk, and as to the latter, in the character of the English people, which encourages us to take our stand on the side of optimism.

If there is an element of periodicity in the constant shifting of literary values, the coming decades of the twentieth century in England might see a rather strong body of achievements and efforts, aiming at an intellectual mastery of the mind over art and over form. This would not quench the ardor which must burn, whatever happens, in the imaginations of the sons, whether obedient or rebellious, of romanticism. But the shifting of the stress would be none the less perceptible.

LOUIS CAZAMIAN.